



Review Article

Influence of Cushioning Variables in the Workplace and in the Family on the Probability of Suffering Stress



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 November 2015

Received in revised form

31 December 2015

Accepted 2 February 2016

Available online 10 March 2016

Keywords:

Bayesian networks

cushioning variables

European survey

stress

working conditions

ABSTRACT

Stress at work and in the family is a very common issue in our society that generates many health-related problems. During recent years, numerous studies have sought to define the term stress, raising many contradictions that various authors have studied. Other authors have attempted to establish some criteria, in subjective and not very quantitative ways, in an attempt to reduce and even to eliminate stressors and their effects at work and in the family context. The purpose of this study was to quantify so-called cushioning variables, such as control, social support, home/work life conciliation, and even sports and leisure activities, with the purpose of, as much as possible, reducing the negative effects of stress, which seriously affects the health of workers. The study employs data from the Fifth European Working Conditions Survey, in which nearly 44,000 interviewees from 34 countries in the European Union participated. We constructed a probabilistic model based on a Bayesian network, using variables from both the workplace and the family, the aforementioned cushioning variables, as well as the variable stress. If action is taken on the above variables, then the probabilities of suffering high levels of stress may be reduced. Such action may improve the quality of life of people at work and in the family.

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1. Introduction

There have been many attempts to establish a good definition of the term stress. Some authors have remarked on the inexactness and controversy of stress as a concept. Because of these uncertainties over the definition of stress, there are many ways of defining it. According to Cox and Mackay [1], these definitions may be categorized into well-differentiated levels in accordance with variables such as perception, stimulus, and response.

Some authors such as Selye and Ogilvie [2] have explained the term stress by likening it to physical and psychological attitudes of the human body that a person experiences in the face of any environmental stimulus, denoting it in this case as a stressor. According to these authors, the definition of stress may therefore be set in the context of a response of the human body to any stressor or stressful behavior.

The term stress, which is defined as a perception, is encapsulated in cognitive processes that have a *posteriori* physical and psychological effects. In this context, other authors such as Edwards [3] recognized that no situation is stressful until a person defines it

or experiences it. Other authors mention satisfaction and job dissatisfaction as being associated with stress [4].

Another aspect of the term stress, which is defined as a means of union between people and the environment in which they live, encompasses two possible important definitions:

- Some solutions emphasize differences between the demands placed on an individual and his/her capabilities of confronting them based on his/her assessments of those differences. McGrath and Altman [5] defined it as “an instability between necessity, the person and his capability under circumstances in which individual despair and disappointment at finding an answer will have significant consequences on him”.
- Other authors have identified the differences between the environment in which people live and their needs in relation to it. Thus, authors such as Edwards [3], defined stress as “the negative difference between a situation that the person perceives and the hypothetical situation desired by that person”.

Many studies have examined stress reduction to improve people's quality of life. Kopelman [6] highlighted that all changes in the

intervention of any firm or organization can affect states of tension and stress that working people can experience. There are various studies related to the optimization of working conditions that underline important aspects such as environmental noise, toxic products, and ergonomic studies. Moreover, professional improvements and good treatment and management of human resources within the firm will notably reduce the risk of suffering stress. Researchers such as Semmer [7] have highlighted the importance of not overlooking the employment position itself, in other words, the tasks that the worker performs. In this context, different ways of performing work-related tasks and the attachment of greater importance to those tasks by line managers are effective stress-prevention methods. Likewise, measures such as frequent changes in working hours and even in the speed of work can help to prevent stress, provided that control is exercised at all times over the work to be done. Finally, investigators such as Peiró [8] have studied important stress-prevention aspects related to variables of social support, conciliation of work and family life, and involvement in sports and leisure activities. These variables were used in the model that we had generated in our study. They serve as the basis for the reduction of stress levels in both the workplace and in family life. All of these variables are explained below.

Environmental conditions in the workplace, as Kopelman [6] noted, have been the subject of regulations that are intended to establish minimum health and safety requirements in the workplace in matters related to environmental noise, toxic products, ergonomics, and so forth. Firms are capable of proposing improvements in situations that principally create stressful states in the workforce.

A theory by Gil-Monte and Peiró [9] that has recently gained ground is that there are features that often contradict the main principles of scientific organization intended to obtain good results in the workplace. These authors maintain the concept of improving and optimizing employment positions by introducing a degree of autonomy in them, changing the way things are done, giving an identity to the activities themselves within the organization and, consequently, giving strength and importance to all the activities to be developed within the firm. Investigators such as Kopelman [6] conducted experiments on certain working contexts in firms, highlighting that the value of the employment position usually has greater repercussions on the quality than on the amount of work that is carried out. He highlighted a reduction in absenteeism at work and a considerably increased sense of wellbeing in the workplace. He also introduced the concept of the work group, that is, teamwork based on the unity of the entire firm or organization in the performance of their own tasks. In this concept, distribution of activities within the group and planning by the leader of the team within the organization are important.

According to Hall and Hall [10], all issues related to working hours and speed of work are the principal generator of stress in all senses. Firms have proposed different ways of reducing the factors that generate stress, including flexi-time, a shorter work week, half-day working arrangements, and rotation of job posts.

In many cases, organizations offer their workers and directors training on time management, with the fundamental aim of improving their knowledge and skills in areas such as acceptable delegating of work, prioritizing the completion of important activities rather than secondary jobs, as well as phasing out attachment of the term urgent to work-related activities. Introduction of these changes into the organization can result in improvements in stress levels within the firm.

Karasek [11] proved that the objectives set by directors or management in any firm or organization allow them to establish more precisely the responsibilities of all of its personnel. They thus lead to workers' feeling of greater responsibility, greatly clarifying the responsibilities and the expectations of the management and

increasing the confidence of all workers. According to this author, the participation of operators also increases when they seek solutions to any problem, thereby reducing levels of stress in the organization.

Other researchers such as Peiró [12] found that one of the most important sources of stress mentioned by professional managers and workers is their own career development within the organization. According to this author, one of the techniques that firms can develop to reduce stress indices in the organization is planning and study of the promotion of workers within the organization.

In another study, Peiró and Salvador [13] examined different actions in the programming of human resources that can generate or reduce stressful situations among workers on the basis of the approach to such programming. Therefore, the publication of a job offer and the consequent employee selection process can greatly clarify aspects of the job and its social environment. On the contrary, attention may solely center on the knowledge and the drawbacks of each person. Therefore, they posited that all staff selection and training processes can be sources of stress reduction, especially in the phases following the commencement of employment.

The term control principally refers to how work is done and has two components. (1) The principle of autonomy: this refers to the possibility that a person has to take work-related decisions to control his/her own activities within each organization. (2) Skills development: this component is related to the degree to which the employment position allows people to exercise and to develop their own capabilities through training, as well as application of creativity in their various tasks.

Karasek [11], defined the term control by using a theoretical model. This model, which is introduced in a later section, takes four broad classifications of jobs or occupations as a reference for the levels of psychological demand and control. This theory also introduces the influence of the control variable on conflicts in the workplace, which has direct repercussions on stress. This author highlighted concepts such as job-related autonomy, as well as opportunities for advancement and development at work, identifying two positive characteristics in the definition of control, albeit noting that these are not the only positive attributes. Other aspects of control over the time available to the worker in an organization (breaks, permits, holiday periods, etc.) should also be taken into account. His theory also highlights other important parameters such as feelings towards the job and the level of responsibility held by the worker.

The most negative health-related aspect according to Karasek [11], is the high psychological demands and the low level of variable control, which create high levels of stress. This variable has importance in relation to the health of workers, as it is an available variable for balancing the demands of work in the organization. Johnson et al [14] proposed modification of this model. They also introduced social support as an important variable in the control of stress levels in the workplace, in addition to the variables demand and control. They posited that the variable social control has two basic components: (1) the support of colleagues at work; and (2) the support of line managers and supervisors of work activities in the organization. The variable social support between workers and their line managers, as this theory explains, identifies a functional characteristic of the relations, while the unit of the group within the firm encapsulates it in an emotional aspect. This aspect represents a modifying variable of the effect of stress, in that very high social support in the workplace diminishes the effects of variable stress; conversely, these values increase if social support is low.

According to Artazcoz et al [15], the conciliation of working life (employment) and family life (relatives) is a technique that can facilitate aspects of real equality between men and women and can reduce levels of tension and stress. Conciliation is aimed at obtaining a new distribution of social and economic systems in an organization where women can conciliate different aspects of their

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